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Eng. 101

22 Nov. 2004

Ellington's Adventures in Music and Geography

In studying the influence of Latin American, African, and Asian music on modern American composers, music historians tend to discuss such figures as Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Henry Cowell, Alan Hovhaness, and John Cage (Brindle 141). They usually overlook Duke Ellington, whom Brindle rightly calls "one of America's great composers" (142), probably because they are familiar only with Ellington's popular pieces, like "Sophisticated Lady," "Mood Indigo," and "Solitude." Still little known are the many ambitious orchestral suites Ellington composed, several of which, such as Black, Brown, and Beige, (originally entitled The African Suite), The Liberian Suite, The Far East Suite, The Latin American Suite, and Afro-Eurasian Eclipse, explore his impressions of the people, places, and music of other countries.

Not all music critics, however, have ignored Ellington's excursions into longer musical forms. In the 1950s, for example, while Ellington was still alive, H. Wiley Hitchcock compared him with Ravel, Delius, and Debussy:

The continually enquiring mind of Ellington...has sought to extend steadily the imaginative boundaries of the musical form on which it subsists....Ellington since the mid-1930s has been engaged upon extending both the imagery and the formal construction of written jazz. (122-123)

Ellington's earliest attempts to move beyond the three-minute limit were fairly unsuccessful (Brindle 135). These attempts, however, displayed his potential in many ways.